

SYDENHAM HOUSE, OLD ROAD TO BLOOMFIELD, NEWARK, NEW JERSEY 07104

In November of 1954 Dorland J. and Elizabeth B. Henderson entered a contract to buy for \$6000 a badly dilapidated fourteen room farm house on a piece of property roughly 150 feet wide and 100 feet deep in the Forest Hill section of Newark, New Jersey. The builder-owners of the original part of the house were said to be John and Susannah Sydenham who were married in 1711. In April of 1959 the Hendersons were able to buy for \$1000 an additional fifty feet adjoining frontage land which was seventy-five feet deep. They were not able to gain occupancy until April 1955 because of the tenancy of two women who had lived there for many years as the rent-free sisters-in-law of Dr. G. Rae Lewis who bought the house from the last of the Sydenhams in the 1920s.

The first year was a series of frustrations as well as accomplishments for the Hendersons. Sewer, water, and gas lines were brought to the house in an easement from the street in back since the house faced the park on an unimproved street. The Hendersons could not afford to buy the whole piece of land. Three houses were erected in back in the course of the following year. A gas-fired hot water heating system was installed by a plumber. The old coal furnace and radiators were taken out by a junk dealer. One mason started to rebuild the caved-in front wall but had to be let go because of high prices and poor workmanship. He was replaced by another who finished the front wall in December and stayed on for several years doing chimney re-building, plastering ceilings after Mr. Henderson had taken down the old ones and put up the rocklath. At one point both he and the gas company wanted more money than the Hendersons had and they had to get bank and credit union loans to tide them over.

Mr. Henderson, an electrical engineer, was employed as a department head by the New Jersey State Department of Transportation; retiring in 1970. Mrs. Henderson was employed as a school social worker in East Orange, N.J., quitting in 1959. Between them, they did as much of the work themselves as they knew or could learn how to do. They used 246 gallons of paint remover to reveal the bare wood which they treated with a linseed oil-turpentine mixture. Mr. Henderson laid a cement floor in the entire basement; installed miles of insulation; made storm doors; painted walls; did structural repairs; electrical work; and carpentry. Mrs. Henderson removed wallpaper; re-glazed all the windows; spackled holes and fissures in plaster; removed thousands of tacks and nails from window frames and floors. She also made Irish linen curtains for the windows to go on the wooden brackets and rods fashioned by her husband.

The deed to the property stated that the street in front was "Old Road to Bloomfield now called First Street." After considerable nudging of the city officials, it was agreed that the name would be changed back to the original name. Then there was more haggling until the sign went up at the corner. Then there was the hurdle to get the postal authorities to honor the "new" name. The latter finally capitulated in July of 1955. It was years before the United Parcel and Railway Express acknowledged that there was such a street and the delivery service of the New Jersey Bell Telephone Company directories still doubts it. In October 1969 the first attempt was made to get the Hagstrom Map Company to include the Old Road to Bloomfield on the city map. At last the 1977 editions of the city and county Hagstrom maps included the Old Road to Bloomfield. Twice during the years these signs have been stolen. Each time it was a matter of weeks before the city sign department came up with a new sign.

Among the first prolonged endeavors was the effort to get the outside of the house and the surrounding grounds to look well maintained not only for preservation but to keep predators and curious strangers at bay. For years the sisters had been tormented by taunting and destructive youngsters in the neighborhood. Mr. Henderson installed storm windows locked from the inside on all the downstairs windows and gave the upper wooden structure of the house three successive coats of paint: white, pink, and "colonial" red. Twenty years later he opted for a spray coat of linseed oil-turpentine following scraping of the earlier paint. Many hours were put into reclaiming the grounds, planting shrubs, carving out flower and vegetable gardens, transplanting, such as baby oaks that had been established by foraging squirrels.

Squirrels had been living in the house for years. It took persistence and ingenuity to get them out of the inside of the house; off the outside of the house; and keep them off the bird-feeding stations. In the beginning termites were a considerable threat. They had been housed in the unremoved coal ashes which were heaped up around the old furnace and kept comfortably damp by the periodic flooding of the basement because of heavy rains and the dry walls. Abandoned and stray dogs took refuge on the grounds from time to time and wouldn't go away. Many of them had psychological problems such as fear of people or automobiles. These were turned over to the Humane Society or the dog catcher. The neighbors had earlier complained about the condition of the property. Now they worried that it might become a tea room, museum, or rooming house. The Hendersons' efforts with people were about equally divided between fending off or satisfying curious strangers and re-directing neighbors who had been accustomed to walking through the property to the back street. Numerous people claimed the sisters had promised to sell them the property. By and large the police were much more interested in the changes taking place in the house than they were in incursions on the property.

From the very beginning the news media was discouraged from an over-active interest because of possible repercussions from the general public. Group tours were definitely restricted although there were over a dozen from 1965 through 1977 with more than 500 sight-seers involved. The house was included in the Historic American Buildings Survey of 1935-36. It was "counted" by the Newark Historic Sites and Buildings Committee in 1960; added to the New Jersey Historic Sites Inventory in 1966; and listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1970.

In 1964 the Hendersons received a Certificate of Merit in the Green Thumb Competition and Honorable Mention in the Photographic Competition of the New Jersey Tercentenary. Burlington House awarded them in 1974 for interior design and in 1975 for their gardening efforts. They were given citations for the restoration by the Newark Preservation and Landmarks Committee in 1975 and by the North Ward Property Owners and the Newark Bicentennial Commission in 1976.

On numerous occasions the Hendersons visited museums, gardens, and old houses in the area and in New England to sharpen their perceptions of what should be done on their particular project. As the years passed they were able to buy some authentic 18th century country furniture until the prices became too exorbitant in recent years. Mr. Henderson made beds, tables, benches, candelabra, and small accessories out of old wood completely with hand tools. Mrs. Henderson studied ceramics and weaving at the Newark Museum; now working on two looms at home and hand-building ceramics in a private studio. Much of her work is in evidence in the house.

From very early in their tenure, they began looking for some historical, cultural, or educational institution which would preserve the house and grounds after their deaths. The national agencies did not want it, especially without an endowment, since no known nationally important person was connected with the history of the house. The endowment was also a stickler for the local agencies. The Hendersons made some gestures in the direction of establishing a foundation for the eventual maintenance of the property only to discover that recent laws made this unfeasible.

Then the Board of Trustees of the Newark Museum Association agreed to the devise of the property, establishing the Sydenham House Endowment Fund in its accounts, which by virtue of its being under the aegis of the Museum could provide a tax-deductible lure for potential givers. This fund was launched with an initial amount of \$1099 representing \$1059 held in trust from tours conducted by the Newark Preservation and Landmarks Committee plus two small contributions which had been given the Hendersons.

On June 22, 1977, the negotiations with the Museum were concluded with the Hendersons drawing up their wills to provide for the passage of ownership of the house and grounds to the Newark Museum from the last to survive. The Hendersons, not wishing to give up their prerogatives as owners, are committed to maintain the property until that time despite recurring costs due to the passage of years as well as galloping inflation.

November 1977